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ABSTRACT

A discussion of a particular problem in an individual teacher's second language classroom leads to a definition of "action research", examines the issues to be addressed before undertaking it, and results in suggestions for designing and implementing the study. Action research is defined as a process designed to improve teaching and facilitate learning by identifying a specific classroom problem, targeting causes through systematic data collection (surveys, observation, interviews, etc.), and applying an effective solution to the problem as a result of the data being collected and interpreted. Barriers to effective research are identified, including vague research ideas, professional isolation, lack of resources, and lack of time; possible resolutions for each are examined. Seven steps in conducting an action research process are outlined, and each is discussed. These include initiation (noticing a problem), preliminary investigation, hypothesis development, intervention, evaluation of results, dissemination of findings, and follow-up. An action research project undertaken by the author, to address the problem of an unresponsive class, is used throughout as illustration of the process and considerations in conducting such studies. (Contains 13 references. The survey instrument is appended.) (MSE)

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Chapter 7

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Action Research: Something for Everyone

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For many language teachers, the word "research" often evokes images of a controlled and scholarly project that is only understood by those in the mystic realms of linguists and second language acquisition research. Lightbrown (1985, p. 184) noted how in recent years researchers had "increasingly arranged their own research meetings, apart from the teaching conventions where they are always asked by someone in the audience to relate their findings to teaching practice." On the other hand, most teachers say they are either unable or unwilling to attempt their own research project, saying they lack the time, background, or experience to undertake such a project. Most teachers do not realize the benefits that come from doing small-scale action research projects. If they did, many would take pains not to miss such opportunities, and to invest themselves in the adventure of classroom-centered research.

The purpose of this article is to answer the following questions: What is action research? What obstacles must one overcome before doing an action research project? How can a new or inexperienced teacher begin an action research project? Finally, why should classroom practitioners attempt to do action research? After reading this article, language teachers will be prepared to start their own action research project.

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What is Action Research?

During the past few years, attention has focused on one form of classroom-centered research (CCR) which is called Action Research (AR). LoCastro (1994, p. 5) defined AR as "one form of CCR which is seen as being small scale and situational . . . focused on a particular problem, to try to understand and perhaps solve some concrete problem in an individual teacher's classroom." She also suggested that AR should not to be done by outside researchers, but by actual classroom teachers. For a classroom practitioner who has never done an AR project, gaining the advice and assistance of an outside researcher or veteran teacher is quite beneficial. However, the classroom teacher should do the bulk of the work in order not to disrupt the natural flow of the class.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) also suggested that teachers should use AR with the goal of solving a specific problem in their classrooms. They defined AR as a process of planning, observation, and reflection on the part of the teacher with the goal of finding a solution to specific classroom problems. Other experts in the field (Cohen & Manion, 1985; Nunan, 1992) have written similar definitions.

I define AR as a process designed to improve teaching and facilitate learning by indentifying a specific classroom problem, targeting causes through systematic data collection (surveys, observation, interviews, etc.), and applying an effective solution to the problem as a result of the data being collected and interpreted.

Action research can be carried out by language teachers who do not have any special training in psychometric research methods or statistical analysis. It takes the pragmatic potential of research out of academic settings and puts it back into everyday classrooms. To use an analogy from medicine, action researchers are not specialists but rather general practitioners who diagnose and prescribe remedies for the everyday illnesses (low motivation, undefined learner goals, etc.) that language classes are prone to catch.

Obstacles to Action Research

Barriers to starting an AR project are: Vague research ideas, professional isolation, lack of available resources, and lack of time. These must be addressed before starting the research. The first step is to develop a clear research idea.

Developing a clear research idea may be difficult at first. Griffee (1994, p. 19) said that most research begins with a simple idea which might be noticing something or wondering why something is the case. Griffee added that another way to get a research idea is to pay attention to the areas of pain and frustration in your teaching. Problems are prime motivators of AR projects. As teachers, we sometimes need to "come up against a brick wall" in our classrooms before we are able to slow down and reflect upon what is not working well. Ideas for AR usually come naturally from this process of introspection.

If focusing on areas of difficulty or discomfort proves too daunting or metaphysical, teachers interested in AR should devote time to reading current teacher's journals that deal with problems, solutions, and issues that others have encountered in their classrooms. Sometimes such reading can reveal a problem that has previously gone undefined.

After identifying a problem in your classroom situation, write your research idea as a question that will help in finding a solution for the problem. It must be possible to find an answer to your question. For example, "Why do students come to class?" may be a vague and difficult question to answer, but the question "What classroom activities interest my students?" might be possible to answer through systematic observation, surveys, or other research tools.

Seek out other teachers while forming your research question. I believe that teachers improve their craft when in productive dialog with other professionals. If possible, join a language teachers' union or organization. In Japan, the most influential professional organization that language teachers can choose to join is the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT), but there are other organizations as well (JACET, Nippon Communication Gakkai, etc.). It is possible that a local chapter of a professional teachers' group meets in your city. If you do not have access to a local chapter, then seek out experienced teachers. Every city or region has at least one or two local "gurus" who are invaluable in helping new teachers get started. Find them. At all costs, break the isolation and start to network with other teachers. Share your ideas and pedagogic problems with them. New teachers are often surprised to find their problem is common to many in the profession. If this is the case in your situation, other teachers may ask to collaborate with you on your AR project.

After forming the research question and making contact with other colleagues, search for resources. It is vital to gain a better understanding of your research ideas. If you do not check the background of your subject properly, you may find out later that you have only repeated another person's work. Joining a teachers' organization such as JALT usually means you receive a regular magazine or journal full of interesting and helpful articles. Going to a regional or national language teachers' conference provides an opportunity to browse through publishers' displays of resource materials.

Some teachers may live near a prefectural or university library. However, as a word of warning, learning how to cooperate with a local library bureaucracy may require an investment of time before it bears much fruit. Having a computer with a modem is also a great tool for a literature search. Baskin (1994) listed contact names and addresses, current costs, and procedures involved in searching for journal articles and documents in Japanese universities and computer networks. Teachers wishing to do research in Japan would do well to read his article.

Time is probably the major concern of a teacher wishing to embark on an AR project. It is difficult to make the time for reading or networking. There are

always many immediate and pressing demands. However, the time spent on idea formation and reading for AR is an investment that produces lasting dividends. One's teaching and understanding of the processes involved in learning acquisition are enhanced by the insights gained from a literature search. The relationships we build through networking also enrich our lives. The increased rapport we gain with students who respond to our efforts can make a world of difference in the day-to-day grind of the school year. Not making the time for this type of endeavor is a lost opportunity.

Doing Your Own Action Research Project

Can a teacher with no previous experience undertake AR? The answer is an emphatic "yes." This section will outline an AR project I began with absolutely no knowledge of AR and which resulted in an encouraging turnaround in my classes.

The following points are paraphrased from Nunan's (1992, p. 19) seven-step cycle for AR:

1. Initiation	The teacher notices a problem in class.
2. Preliminary Investigation	The teacher spends time observing the class and taking notes of their behavior.
3. Hypothesis	After observation, the teacher forms a question or hypothesis as to the cause of the problem.
4. Intervention	The teacher tries several solutions to solve the problem.
5. Evaluation	After some weeks, the teacher consciously observes or measures the class again to see if there has been any improvement.
6. Dissemination	The teacher shares his findings with others.
7. Follow-up	The teacher looks for other methods to solve his original classroom problem.

Although I was not aware of Nunan's cycle when I started my project, I followed as similar process.

Initiation: Teacher Notices a Problem in Class

My technical college English class was not responding. From the first day of class, the students were slumping over their desks. They rarely looked up. When I greeted them, none returned the greeting, but instead looked furtively at each other before returning to their contemplation of their desks. Some slept through the class despite being awakened several times. To the simple question, "What's your name?", I several times received the response, "No." I was

assured by the school management that the students were merely shy and would eventually come out of their shells. However, the situation continued for weeks and then months. When no amount of class preparation seemed to work, I knew I had a real problem on my hands.

The first thing I decided to do was to begin networking. I joined my local chapter of JALT. It was there that I met experienced and concerned teachers who were willing to help me. Drawing on their advice, I found local libraries and requested catalogs from publishers of educational materials. I read texts that provided me with a better understanding of second language teaching methodology and theories. It was my hope that research could somehow help me find some solutions to my problem.

Preliminary Investigation

I read an article in *The Language Teacher* (Kobayashi, Redecop, & Porter, 1992) describing an AR project which examined Japanese college students' motivation to learn English in relation to university entrance exams. The findings were interesting for me because one of the groups that was surveyed was from a technical college. The authors found that while the interest in English-speaking cultures was high amongst the students surveyed, their intrinsic motivation—by which I mean motivation that is not attached to external rewards or incentives (see Deci, 1975, p. 23 for a more detailed discussion)—to learn English was much lower than their university counterparts. They speculated that perhaps lower scores on college entrance exams had something to do with lower intrinsic motivation but left the question open for further investigation.

Hypothesis: The Teacher Forms a Question After Observation

It occurred to me that my students, who had just recently graduated from high school, might have intrinsic motivation problems similar to those at the technical college students mentioned in the above article. I formulated the following question: Is the intrinsic motivation of Japanese technical college students to learn English lowered due to their lack of participation in or inability to pass university entrance examinations?

After forming my question, I began to read as much literature as I could find on the subject of motivation and the Japanese educational system. I quickly obtained books through publishers which helped me get a general idea about my topic. I also took advantage of the English research library at the Northern Illinois State University's satellite campus in Nakajo, Niigata. I took my time in reading and absorbed as much information as I could.

I then made a survey similar in focus to the one that Kobayashi et al. (1992) administered to their students (see Appendix 1). I omitted questions which did not pertain to technical college students, and added other questions designed to ascertain the students' intrinsic motivation to learn English. The survey was then translated into Japanese and distributed to 83 students.

Table 1
Comparison of Hadley 19913 and Kobayashi et al. 1992.
"NA" signifies questions not used in the survey.

Results of Survey (Percentage of Responses) Hadley 1993.	Results of Survey (Percentage of Responses) Kobayashi, Redecop, and Porter (1992).
1. Abroad to speak English Yes: 20% No: 80%	1. Abroad to speak English Yes: 4% No: 96%
2. Interested in foreign cultures Yes: 94% No: 6%	2. Interested in foreign cultures Yes: 83% No: 17%
3. Interested in explaining Japanese culture Yes: 53% No: 47%	3. Interested in explaining Japanese culture Yes: 52% No: 48%
4. Have a foreign friend Yes: 27% No: 73%	4. Have a foreign friend Yes: 19% No: 81%
5. Interested in English in Junior High Yes: 75% No: 25%	5. Interested in English in Junior High Yes: NA No: NA
6. Interested in speaking to a foreigner Yes: 100% No: 0%	6. Interested in speaking to a foreigner Yes: 73% No: 27%
7. Interested in English in High School Yes: 76% No: 24%	7. Interested in English in High School Yes: 60% No: 40%
8. Want to speak to foreigners outside school Yes: 27% No: 73%	8. Want to speak to foreigners outside school Yes: NA No: NA
9. English is important Yes: 75% No: 25%	9. English is important Yes: 87% No: 13%
10. English most enjoyable Kin: 2% Elem: 6% JH: 30% HS: 46% Pres: 16%	10. English most enjoyable Kin: NA Elem: NA JH: NA HS: NA Pres: NA
11. Took university entrance examination Yes: 18% No: 82%	11. Took university entrance examination Yes: NA No: NA
12. Examination facilitated speaking Yes: 19% No: 81%	12. Examination facilitated speaking Yes: 15% No: 85%
13. Watch English movies Often: 20% Some: 75% Never: 5%	13. Watch English movies Often: 8% Some: 50% Never: 42%
14. Class that motivates more Serious: 19% Relaxed: 81%	14. Class that motivates more Serious: 12% Relaxed: 88%
15. Regularly read other sources of English Yes: 17% No: 83%	15. Regularly read other sources of English Yes: NA No: NA

I tallied the results (see Table 1) and compared them to the percentages from the Kobayashi et al. (1992) study. I was surprised to find that my students were all (100%) interested in speaking to foreigners (question 6), and almost all (94%) were interested in foreign cultures (q. 2). Although the Kobayashi et al. study did not include a question about speaking to native speakers outside the classroom (q. 8), I added such a question because I felt that it would be a significant indicator of the students' intrinsic motivation. I noted that the same students (27%) who already had foreign friends (q. 4) were the only ones (27%) interested in speaking with a foreigner outside the school (q. 8). The low percentage indicated in question 8 was especially surprising since 20% of students in my sample had been abroad for the express purpose of speaking English, as opposed to the 4% in the Kobayashi et al. study. I was also shocked to find that only 18% of my students had even attempted to take a university entrance examination (q. 11).

The survey results were analysed using the *Survey Power 2.1* software package (Jepson, 1992). The responses to questions 5, 7, and 10 suggested that junior high school and high school were crucial times in the development of intrinsic motivation for studying English. The highest percentage (76%) of students said they were *interested* in English during their high school years (q. 7). Almost half (46%), felt that high school was the time when English study was *most enjoyable* (q. 10). This seemed to contradict everything that I had heard about the state of English language teaching in Japanese high schools.

Analysis of the results showed that 74% of the students who did not take an examination (q. 11) were also not interested in speaking to foreigners in English outside the classroom (q. 8), and, that the students who did not take a university examination were also not likely to read any English materials when not in school (q. 15). The implications of this correlation were not examined in detail, although, at the time my colleages and I suspected that non-participation in university entrance examinations may have influenced the students' intrinsic motivation to study English.

The survey suceeded in identifing certain times and conditions when our students were more interested in English, and in demonstrating that intrinsic motivation had been stronger before the students arrived at the technical college. Using the data from this survey, we began to think about some practical ways to try to revive that motivation.

Intervention: Offering Solutions

I discussed the results of the survey with the rest of the native English speaker (NS) staff at the school and noted the following: (a) a high percentage of students interested in speaking to foreigners within a "safe" environment such as the school or at school functions, (b) a strong student interest in English movies, and (c) a desire—amongst the students—for a more relaxed classroom setting. Taking advantage of my role as head teacher at the school, other NS

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teachers and I attempted strategies we hoped would raise the students' intrinsic motivation to learn English.

More native English speakers were invited to our seasonal school parties. In the past, the parties had been a closed affair which looked sadly like a middle school dance party, but students began to interact with the native speakers and use the opportunity to speak English in a natural setting. Together with other NS teachers at the school, we introduced video to the classroom, using focused listening and information gap activities. We knew how important pop music was to our students, so we incorporated a number of activities using music (see Griffee, 1992). To foster a more relaxed classroom setting, we changed our old texts which were based on an audiolingual syllabus and switched to a more communicative-based syllabus. We included many task-based classroom activities to get students out of their chairs and speaking to other group members. Borrowing ideas from Moskowitz (1978) as well as Davis and Rinvolucri (1990), we used more "caring and sharing" activities so that students could express themselves on issues important to them, such as dating, jobs, and entertainment. We encouraged them to work together in their language learning.

On occasion, we took our students out of the classroom and taught in parks, markets, and coffee shops. Although not all the students warmed up to it, we instituted a drama day at the school where students could exercise their skills in theater and role play.

Evaluation

After three months, all teachers observed a higher level of classroom participation. Whereas students had often been absent, unresponsive, or asleep, we found that the majority were laughing, speaking, and even joking with the teachers in class. Several of the students made new friends or penpals with native English speakers outside the school, and the students began to have more conversations with teachers outside of class. After graduation, a number of students went on extended personal trips to Australia, England, and the United States for the purposes of meeting penpals, learning more about English-speaking cultures, and improving their language skills. We saw a dramatic turnaround in our students' motivation thanks, in part, to our efforst to apply what we learned through AR.

Dissemination: Sharing the Findings with Others

Teachers can share the findings of their AR projects in local teachers' meetings as a presentation, in informal meetings with other colleagues, or by publishing their results for a larger body of readers. While many teachers seem to find articles written by linguists to be dry and unrelated to their classrooms, the same teachers are quick to listen to the findings of a colleague who shares the same day-to-day difficulties. Action research reports get read and appear to have

greater immediate impact on the practices of other classroom teachers than the findings of second language researchers.

Follow-up: New Solutions

Out of curiosity, I networked with other teachers at technical colleges. I wanted to see if the survey results from my school would be similar if we took a larger sampling from other schools in Niigata prefecture and the Tokyo metropolitan area. We administered the same survey to 562 students. The results were indeed similar, yet not as clearly delineated as in the original survey (see Appendix 2). This follow-up of my research on a larger scale lent credence to my earlier findings, and helped me to show my colleagues that the dynamics present in my school might also be present in theirs, hopefully spurring them on to beginning AR projects of their own.

My contract reached its two year limit, and I moved on to teach at the college level. If I had had more time at the technical college, I would have looked for solutions in addition to the ones we tried. This is another aspect of AR: The process is constantly in motion. One cannot afford to rest on one's past accomplishments, but must move forward to keep on the cutting edge of the class's task of learning.

Why Should Teachers Do Action Research?

The advantages of having AR in one's "teaching toolbox" are clear. Apart from improving one's craft, teachers will gain a greater insight into what is going on in the minds of their students. Clearer communication will be fostered between teacher and student. Few teachers work well in a professional vacuum, so opportunities for networking with other dynamic and conscientious educators is a definite plus.

Instead of being a reactive teacher who fumbles in the darkness, groping for something that will work in class for that day, one can become a pro-active teacher through the thoughtful use of AR. Based upon the data gained from research, a teacher can seize the moment and move forward with purpose and clarity.

Conclusion

When I arrived in Japan over three years ago as an inexperienced teacher, I encountered various problems. Not only did I feel isolated and overworked, I also had to deal with culture shock. At the same time, I was struggling to find ways to reach a particularly gloomy, poorly-motivated group of technical college students in a dilapidated building. The administration had no training program for new teachers. Our teaching materials consisted of tattered 15-year-old TESL textbooks obtained from what appeared to be an American college bar-

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gain basement sale. I was overwhelmed and didn't know where to go for help. It is in this type of environment that AR flourishes.

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Appendix 1
Survey

1. Have you been abroad to speak English?
   [ ] A. Yes
   [ ] B. No

2. Are you interested in foreign cultures?
   [ ] A. Yes
   [ ] B. No

3. Are you interested in explaining Japanese culture to foreigners in English?
   [ ] A. Yes
   [ ] B. No

4. Do you have any foreign friends?
   [ ] A. Yes
   [ ] B. No

5. Were you interested in studying English in junior high school?
   [ ] A. Yes
   [ ] B. No

6. Are you interested in speaking to a foreigner?
   [ ] A. Yes
   [ ] B. No

7. Were you interested in studying English in high school?
   [ ] A. Yes
   [ ] B. No

8. Do you ever try to speak English with foreigners outside the school?
   [ ] A. Yes
   [ ] B. No

9. Do you think that English is important for your future job?
   [ ] A. Yes
   [ ] B. No

10. When did you enjoy English the most (circle one)?
   [ ] A. Kindergarten
   [ ] B. Elementary School
   [ ] C. Junior High School
   [ ] D. High School
   [ ] E. Present School

11. Did you take a University Entrance Examination?
   [ ] A. Yes
   [ ] B. No

12. Did the university entrance examinations help you to speak English?
   [ ] A. Yes
   [ ] B. No

13. How often do you watch English movies or videos?
   [ ] A. Often
   [ ] B. Sometimes
   [ ] C. Never

14. Which type of class motivates you more, a serious or relaxed class?
   [ ] A. Serious
   [ ] B. Relaxed.

15. Do you regularly read books, magazines or newspapers in English (not including your textbook)?
   [ ] A. Yes
   [ ] B. No

Appendix 2

Motivation of English Technical College Students: Results of Survey (Percentage of Responses) Hadley, Fountaine, and Megill 1993.

1.	Abroad to speak English	Yes: 44%	No: 56%
2.	Interested in foreign cultures	Yes: 90%	No: 10%
3.	Interested in explaining Japanese culture	Yes: 57%	No: 43%
4.	Have a foreign friend	Yes: 38%	No: 62%
5.	Interested in English in Junior High	Yes: 68%	No: 32%
6.	Interested in speaking to a foreigner	Yes: 93%	No: 7%
7.	Interested in English in High School	Yes: 65%	No: 35%
8.	Want to speak with foreigner	Yes: 37%	No: 63%
9.	English is important	Yes: 79%	No: 21%
10.	English most enjoyable	Kindergarten: 7% Elementary School: 8% Junior High: 21% High School: 45% Present School: 23%	
11.	Took university entrance examination	Yes: 31%	No: 69%
12.	Examination facilitated speaking	Yes: 33%	No: 67%
13.	Watch English movies	Often: 29% Sometimes: 64% Never: 7%	
14.	Class that motivates more	Serious: 23%	Relaxed: 77%
15.	Regularly read other sources of English	Yes: 20%	No: 80%